



THE COMEDIES

Love's Labour's Lost

Love's Labour's Lost



THE STORY of *Love's Labour's Lost* is laid in Navarre, an ancient kingdom in Spain, but there is nothing in the least Spanish about the play. If it has any reality at all, it is an English reality. The young lords and ladies are storybook versions of some of the men and women who could be seen around the English court, and the country people are cheerful parodies of types Shakespeare could have met in his native Warwickshire.

The play is less a story than a game. The plot is as light as a soap bubble, and its charm lies in the kind of dancing light that it throws on some of the subjects which fascinated young men and women in Shakespeare's day. It is almost a Valentine of a play, half a love-Valentine and half a comic-Valentine, and has to be read in the spirit in which it was written.

The story opens in the park of the king of Navarre, where he and his lords are discussing a highly idealistic project. They wish to retire from the world for three years and dedicate themselves to contemplation and the pursuit of knowledge instead of worldly

Stories from Shakespeare

enjoyment and the pursuit of young ladies. The king and two of his lords are quite content with the idea, but the liveliest of them all, Berowne, has strenuous objections.

He finally agrees to sign a pledge along with the rest and then begins to study some of the special statutes that are designed to keep the court of Navarre pure, virtuous and womanless. He is especially interested in the law that forbids anyone to talk to a woman, since, as he points out helpfully, the princess of France is arriving in Navarre on a diplomatic mission and it will be rather difficult to avoid talking to her. The king hastily withdraws this particular statute, and Berowne signs with pleasure.

The rule against women is intended to apply to everyone in the court, but word comes that the new law has already been broken. A country boy named Costard has been seen walking out in the park with a maid named Jaquenetta, and he is brought before the king by the local constable. The constable also brings a letter from a Spanish knight named Armado, who saw the whole thing and was deeply shocked.

Armado's letter is a parody on a certain kind of ornamental and highly decorated writing that was popular in the days when *Love's Labour's Lost* was written. Instead of saying that he went for a walk because he felt sad, Armado writes: "Besieged with sable-coloured melancholy, I did commend the black-oppressing humour to the most wholesome physic of thy health-giving air." It takes a long time for Armado to explain in his elegant letter that he has merely been in the park at suppertime and seen Costard and Jaquenetta together. What he does not explain is the real reason for his indignation: he is in love with Jaquenetta himself.

Armado is convinced that he is too mighty a soldier to fall in love with a mere country girl, and he has a long chat with his page on the subject. He finally decides that if Hercules and other men of valor could be overcome by Cupid, the god of love, then it is no disgrace for the great Armado to be overcome also. "Adieu, valor, rust, rapier, be still, drum; for your manager is in love. Yea, he loveth. Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet."

Love's Labour's Lost

• The conquest of Armado by the god of love is followed by the even more sudden defeat of the king of Navarre and his three lords, for they succumb to the power of Cupid as soon as they meet the princess of France and her three ladies. The princess has been obliged to pitch her tent in the king's park, since his oath does not permit him to lodge her in the palace, but he cannot avoid going to pay her a formal diplomatic call. At least, he does his best to keep it formal, but it is only too clear that the king has fallen in love. Berowne attaches himself to a lovely dark-eyed lady of France named Rosaline, who teases him while he is there and calls him a "merry madcap lord" after he departs. The two other ladies of France look with equal favor on the two remaining lords of Navarre, and it is evident that Armado is not the only one who will be writing love sonnets.

Berowne has never been in love before and he is extremely indignant at his unexpected plight. He has always mocked at lovers, and in his opinion wives are like German clocks, never behaving properly. Moreover, Rosaline is dark and, if she were an ideal beauty, she would be fair. The whole thing is extremely unjust in Berowne's eyes, and evidently a penance that Cupid has imposed

for my neglect
Of his almighty dreadful little might.

The whole austere and womanless community of Navarre is now in love, in spite of all the laws and statutes that have been made on the subject, and the only person who gets any real advantage from the situation is Costard. He is given three farthings by Armado to carry a love letter and a poem to Jaquenetta, and a shilling by Berowne to carry a similar one to Rosaline. Costard does his best to be helpful but he is a minnow in intelligence, and when he finds the princess out hunting deer in the park he gives her the letter that was meant for the country maid.

The local schoolmaster also tries his hand at writing poetry and composes a poem on the death of a deer killed by the princess, while the curate and the constable listen in reverence. The schoolmaster, whose name is Holofernes, is extremely proud of his writing ability but tries to be outwardly casual about it. "This

Stories from Shakespeare

is a gift that I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions . . . The gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it." Their discussion on the art of writing is interrupted by Jaquenetta, who has received the letter that Berowne meant for Rosaline and asks the curate to read it to her. Berowne has written a sonnet and Holofernes is quite severe about it, since in his opinion it lacks the "elegance, facility and golden cadence" of the best poetry. In any case, the sonnet was clearly not intended for Jaquenetta and he sends her off to give it to the king, then settles down to tell the curate exactly what is wrong with the poem he so mistakenly admires.

Berowne is now incurably addicted to writing sonnets, and he is carrying a piece of paper around with him in the park when he sees the king approaching. Berowne hastily conceals himself, and the love-stricken king betrays his emotions immediately with a melancholy "Ah me!" The king, like everyone else, has just composed a sonnet and plans to leave it where the princess will be sure to pick it up.

One of his lords approaches, and with a tact to equal Berowne's the king steps aside and hides himself in a bush. Again a sonnet has been composed to the fair eyes of a lady, and then the fourth lord turns up with an ode. The king rises up out of his bush and informs the two false lords that they have broken their oath, and then Berowne comes out of hiding to reveal that the king has been writing sonnets too.

Berowne is deeply disappointed in his three friends for falling from grace. "Are you not ashamed?" He is just remarking that no one would ever get him to "write a thing in rhyme" when Jaquenetta appears, bearing in her hand the sonnet he wrote to Rosaline. Berowne tries to tear up the paper but one of the lords alertly finds his name on it, and Berowne has to confess that he is a fellow sinner. He endures a good deal of teasing on the subject but takes the position that in reality they are all still faithful to their vow. They made an oath to spend three years in study, and the best thing for any young man to study is a woman. So

Love's Labour's Lost

the four of them decide that they will openly woo the young ladies of France and plan to present revels and entertainments for their delight.

Armado, the Spanish knight, is assigned to work out the show, which, as Armado puts it, is to be presented to the princess in her pavilion "in the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon." He asks Holofernes to help him and they decide to do the Nine Worthies. They are rather short of actors, since they have no one but the curate and the page to help them, but Holofernes feels capable of playing three of the Nine Worthies all by himself, and the constable, who is baffled by everything else in the arrangements, feels that he can at least supply a little music.

The lovesick lords have been sending gifts to their ladies—gloves and pearls and poetry—and the ladies have decided to tease their ardent hosts. They learn that the young gentlemen intend to call on them disguised as Russians, and they decide to put on masks and change their gifts about so that each young man will woo the wrong young lady. The disguised lords have brought the page along with them to deliver a preliminary speech, but he has a difficult time with it because the ladies will not cooperate. The baffled Russians discover that the ladies will not cooperate with them either, and they are finally forced to retire.

The king and his three lords reappear without their disguises, and the king tries to persuade his royal guest to enter the palace. The princess says demurely that she could not possibly agree, since she would be assisting him to break his solemn oath. The king suggests that she may be lonely where she is, and the ladies explain that, on the contrary, they have just been visited by some very foolish Russians. Finally they admit that they know who the Russians were. The lords turn pale, and Rosaline inquires sweetly if they feel seasick, coming so far from Russia. The lords then make the further discovery that each of them has been wooing the wrong lady. They can see now that they are completely forsown, since all day they have been making promises and none of them has been kept.

Stories from Shakespeare

They also discover, Berowne in particular, that it is better to court a lady in prose and do it honestly than to "woo in rhyme" in the high-flown way they have all been doing. Berowne resolves to forsake from that time forward all "taffeta phrases, silken terms precise" and he promises Rosaline that he will use only plain, homespun words in making love to her.

Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed

In russet yeas and honest kersey noes:
And to begin, wench,—so God help me, la!—
My love to thee is sound, sans crack or flaw.

Rosaline points out that "sans" is not a word he should be using under the circumstances, and Berowne can see that the love of fantastical phrases is a sickness from which a man can recover only by degrees.

Meanwhile the amateur actors have been anxiously waiting to put on their show, and they finally send Costard to see if the lords and ladies are ready for them. The king does not want them to perform, since he feels that Navarre has already disgraced itself sufficiently without offering the ladies some bad amateur theatricals. Berowne, however, thinks he would enjoy seeing "one show worse" than the one he and his three friends have already supplied.

Costard is convinced that it will be an excellent show, since he has all the witless enthusiasm of a really bad amateur actor. He starts the proceedings off by playing Pompey, an achievement of considerable difficulty because the audience keeps interrupting him. When he announces with pride that he is Pompey the Big, they inform him that he is supposed to be Pompey the Great, but he acknowledges the correction graciously and manages to get through his lines with great aplomb. The princess, who is a courteous lady, is very kind to him: "Great thanks, great Pompey," and he receives her gratitude with a judicious mixture of modesty and pride. "'Tis not so much worth; but I hope I was perfect. I made a little fault in 'Great.'"

The next Worthy is Alexander, who turns out to be the curate.

Love's Labour's Lost

He starts his speech in a mad rush and is interrupted by his unhelpful audience. He starts over again, forgets his lines and stands paralyzed until Costard has to push him off the stage. Costard, secure in the magnificence of his own performance, is inclined to be forgiving. "He is a marvelous good neighbour, faith, and a very good bowler; but, for Alexander—alas, you see how 'tis."

The next Worthies are Judas Maccabeus and Hercules, played by the schoolmaster and the page. The page is rather small for Hercules, but the amateur actors have solved that problem by presenting Hercules when he was "a babe, a child, a shrimp." Judas Maccabeus manages to finish only one line of his speech because he descends into an argument with the audience, and when Armado comes on as Hector he has no better luck. Armado argues that the audience should be more gentle with Hector. "The sweet war-man is dead and rotten; sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried; when he breathed, he was a man."

The amateur theatricals break up when Costard and Armado forget the Worthies and get into a fight over Jaquenetta, and the audience is hoping for a duel between them when a messenger arrives from the French court. The news he brings sobers them all abruptly, for the king of France is dead.

The princess is so heavy-hearted that she cannot imagine why she ever spent her time in laughter and teasing, and she prepares to go home to France. The four men who will be left behind are really in love, and they make one final promise. During the year in which the princess is in mourning for her father they too will retire from the world, and Berowne, the lively mocker, has an extra penance laid upon him. For a year the man who has laughed at so many people will go around to the hospitals and see if he can persuade laughter there, and Berowne is sobered enough to accept the challenge.

It is winter now in their spirits, after a short, gay spring, and the amateur actors have a final offering in the shape of a dialogue between the cuckoo and the owl. They present two of the loveliest songs in Shakespeare, the ones he used to describe a country winter and a country spring.

Stories from Shakespeare

When daisies pied, and violets blue,
And lady-smocks all silver-white
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight . . .

But winter has the final word, with the owl in the snow, and so
the little story ends.

